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Citation: Quan, Rose, He, Xinming and Sloan, Diane (2016) Examining Chinese Postgraduate Students' Academic Adjustment in the UK Higher Education Sector: A Process-Based Stage Model. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 21 (3). pp. 326-343. ISSN 1356-2517

Published by: Taylor & Francis

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2016.1144585>
<<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2016.1144585>>

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Examining Chinese Postgraduate Students' Academic Adjustment in the UK Higher Education Sector: a *Process-Based Stage Model*

The current theories relating to international student transition have largely tended to concentrate on *what is* to be adapted. This research contributes to the pedagogic literature examining *how* the transition is made by international postgraduate students. Using data from 20 qualitative in-depth interviews in conjunction with observations of teaching sessions and the researchers' field notes, we discovered a *process-based stage model* which identifies a step-by-step approach at a micro level of academic transition. Our findings extended the prior stage modes to incorporate students' pre-arrival experience and claim that the pre-departure stage plays a crucial role on Chinese students' later academic adjustment in the UK. The findings of our *four-stage-model* helps not only higher education institutions increasing sensitivity to the design of study programmes and induction provision but provides practical implications for recruitment agents that attempt to engage students' pre-arrival preparations in terms of enhancing their marketing strategy in the long-term.

Keywords: student transition; postgraduate; Chinese students; process-based stage model; academic adjustment

Introduction

This research discusses the applicability of implementing current stage-model theories relating to international student transition. Haggis (2009: 389) argued that 'there is as yet little research that attempts to document different types of dynamic process through time in relation to learning situations in higher education'. Despite almost a decade of research on Chinese students studying at British Universities, studies have focused primarily on standard-entry undergraduate students (Schweisfurth and Gu 2009; Wang and Byram 2011). The literature reveals limited studies that investigate the cross-culture transition of the diversity of student groups, such as direct entry undergraduate students (Quan, Smailes and Fraser 2013) and in particular from the perspective of this research Chinese postgraduate students (Turner 2006), especially on *how* international students make their transition following a practical process step by step .

When someone enters a new environment, he or she attempts to 'fit in' through culture learning and individual change. This process is defined as 'adjustment' (Thomas and Harrell 1994). It is evident that 'adjustment' tends to follow a predictable learning curve (e.g. U-curve and W-curve), and various stage models have been put forward in the literature on transition (Lysgaard 1955; Torbiorn 1994; Ward and Kennedy 1999). Prior research on stage-model is largely based on two types of sojourners: long-term sojourners, like immigrants (Lysgaard 1955) and short-term sojourners, such as international academic sojourners (Brown and Holloway 2008). Long-term sojourners, in general, seek full acculturation (both socio-cultural and psychological adjustment), and international academic sojourners orientate to achieve short-term academic goals (Wu and Hammond 2011). It is important to distinguish between long-term sojourners and short-term sojourners. In this study, we classify Chinese postgraduate students into the latter group.

Adjustment experiences of international postgraduate students, compared to three year undergraduate (UG) students, differ significantly or in more subtle ways as masters level international students normally spend one year studying in the UK and therefore have less time to adapt to the new regime (Arambewela and Hall 2013). Building upon this assumption, this research argues that although existing studies have provided valuable insights in understanding Chinese students' transition, they have primarily focused on UG students' adjustments (Major 2005; Schweisfurth and Gu 2009). The issues and solutions developed on the basis of Chinese undergraduate students are not fully applicable to Chinese postgraduate students. Moreover, prior studies generally focus on what these transition issues are and provide very brief narrative on appropriate solutions. Limited efforts have been devoted to discover what this research identifies as the '*sequential transition process*' (how to transit step by step). This highlights the need to ask the questions '*How do Chinese postgraduate students adjust to the British higher education system in such a short time scale?*' and '*Is there a step-led model to follow which could support them through their transition?*' These questions reveal a gap in the current literature discussing the transition issues of full-time, postgraduate Chinese students and address the call for future research by Gale and Parker (2014), including focusing on both the vertical transition to postgraduate study and the horizontal from home to university.

Acknowledging the gap in the literature on transition, our research makes both theoretical and practical contributions by offering insights into how Chinese postgraduate students make the year-long adjustment journey to fit the British higher education (HE) system. First, transition is better understood as a process of change. Time frame, arguably, determines the purposes of adjustment and the degree of 'fit'. Beyond prior *contents-focused-transition* studies (knowing what), we found that Chinese postgraduate students followed a *sequential-focused-transition* process (knowing how) to achieve short-term academic goals with identification of different coping strategies at each stage. Our study suggested a clear time frame for each stage compared to many prior adjustment models that provide limited indication regarding how long each stage of the sojourn lasts (Brown and Holloway 2008). Secondly, our model makes explicit the stage-based process that Chinese postgraduate students may utilise in the learning environment of the British higher education system. Our study suggests that if Chinese postgraduate students are proactive in meeting challenges and follow the predictable learning curve, they will possibly achieve better academic results in a student-centred higher education system. Finally, the findings in our study provide a valuable insight for HE institutions to provide an optimum service for vulnerable groups (e.g. Chinese postgraduate students), for example through providing timely support for international students at their first arrival stage. Another takeaway of our study is that recruitment agents can provide extended services (e.g. academic preparation) for Chinese students at the pre-departure stage to attract more student customers.

Literature review

Chinese students in transition

The internationalisation of higher education, as a fast-growing phenomenon, gives rise to research on international students' transition (Quan, et al. 2013). According to the existing literature, learning across cultures creates greater challenges and difficulties for international students provoked by work or life-change events (Sluss and Ashforth 2007), such as studying abroad. Given the economic and cultural changes and the importance of income generated by overseas students, the percentage of Chinese students, especially from mainland China, in many postgraduate programmes is increasing rapidly and is overwhelmingly high compared to those from other countries (BCISA, 2012). According to The Royal Institute of International Affairs (2004) there were 32,000 mainland Chinese studying in UK higher education in 2002-03. The number rose to 45,000 in 2003-04. This population, predicted by the British Council (2004), will be 130,900 in 2020. To satisfy better the demand for this market and improve student performance, many studies investigate this group of students' learning experience in British universities (Turner 2006; Liu 2006; Wang, Harding and Mai 2012; Wang and Byram 2011; Quan et al. 2013). The majority of these studies intend to answer questions like how difficult it is for Chinese students to adapt to the learning system in the UK (*individual factor*); how the differences between Chinese and British education systems affect their academic learning (*differences of academic conventions*); and how British higher education institutions can help this group of students to overcome difficulties and improve their teaching and learning outcomes (*institutional support*).

Chinese students' adjustment experiences at the British-speaking universities have been discussed at length in previous studies. Pedagogic researchers make great efforts to discover challenges of university adjustment Chinese students face when studying in different English-speaking Western countries, including UK (Wu 2010; Wang and Byram 2011); United States (Major, 2005; Wei et al. 2007); Canada (Wang 2012; Guo and Chase 2011); New Zealand (Ward et al. 1998; Cambell and Li 2008) and Australia (Ehrich et al. 2014; Gale and Parker 2014). According to these studies, it seems that Chinese students encountered similar difficulties and challenges during their academic transition as an international pedagogic sojourner in Western English-speaking countries. For example, the general impression of Chinese international students studying in Western English-spoken universities, according to existing empirical findings, is negative. This is evidenced in work identifying Chinese international students described as providing less contribution to class and group discussions (Schweisfurth and Gu 2009); passive-receptive learner (Turner 2006); poor written and spoken English (Heffernan et al. 2010); lack of critical thinking (Wang and Byram 2011) and emphasising memorisation (Entwistle and Tait 1994). Three main reasons have been discovered by pedagogic researchers to explain these phenomena, including individual attitudes and prior experiences (Arambewela and Hall 2013),

insufficient institutional support (Bamford 2008) and the cultural differences between China and UK both socially and academically (Zhou et al. 2008).

However, not all Chinese students fall into the stereotypes (Heffernan et al. 2010). It is claimed that some Chinese international students react positively to overseas study (Wang and Byram 2011). They view overseas study as an opportunity to experience new ways of learning and adjust to acquire knowledge through continuously adapting to social norms and values in the host country (Wang et al. 2011). This finding confirms that there is a discourse in the area of international students' transition research. It seems imperative that pedagogical researchers should extend the knowledge on international students' transition by considering the variable of *context*. For example, why do Chinese students perform so differently? Is there a pattern to follow during their transition? Scholars have analysed the process of adjustment from both cultural and academic aspects (Lysgaard 1955; Gullahorn and Gullahorn 1963; Zhang et al. 1999; Brown and Holloway 2008). Building on these prior studies, we aim to discover whether there is an actionable stage model adopted by Chinese postgraduate students to enable them to achieve expected academic goals.

The process of adjustment

Existing models acknowledge that cross-cultural transition follows an incremental model, appearing as a sequential transition (Oberg 1960; Gullahorn and Gullahorn 1963; Adler 1975; Major 2005; Brown and Holloway 2008). Researchers have discovered several stage models predicting the process of sojourner adjustment in adapting to a new culture over time (Lysgaard 1955; Wu and Hammond 2011). Table 1 summarises the relevant models and their differences.

Insert table 1 here

Lysgaard (1955) studied Norwegian scholars in the United States using the U-shaped model. He claimed that students follow three stages of adjustment: initial adjustment, stage of crisis and finally, adjustment. Having elaborated the U-shape model, Oberg (1960) provided a similar stage model of cross-cultural adaptation, claiming that international sojourners gradually follow four stages during transition: the honeymoon stage; the crisis; the recovery and finally adjustment. Other studies also pictured the international sojourners going through a U-curve of adjustment, including Brown and Holloway's (2008) 4 stage model: excitement and euphoria; culture shock; culture stress and adaptation and Torbion's (1994) four stage model: fascination, culture shock, satisfaction and subjective adjustment. Reflecting the time duration of academic programmes, studies are graphically represented by a U-curve focus on international students' adjustment in the host country. Gullahorn and Gullahorn (1963) extended the U-curve to the W-curve by including sojourners' return home. Taking these empirical findings together, it seems evident that sojourners' adjustment appears to follow a predictable learning curve. The value of these stage models lies in their usefulness in tracking adaptability of cross-cultural sojourners by

providing valuable insights for researchers to understand better sojourners' psychological and sociocultural adjustments.

Despite the popularity of the U-curve, it is criticised for two major shortcomings. First, Lysgaard's (1955) empirical study is not based on a longitudinal design which is 'more appropriate to explore changes in sojourner adjustment over time' (Ward, et al. 1998: 279), the results, therefore, are over-generalized. Second, the contextual factor, the length of sojourners' residence abroad, is ignored in the U-curve; arguably, adjustment behaviours are different between short-stay and long-stay sojourners (Ward et al. 1998). Considering the dynamic and complex cross-cultural transition, many scholars suggest that research with different types of sojourning groups should be pursued (Major 2005; Zhou et al. 2008). Over the past decades, the focus has been on how these stage models apply to students studying abroad (student sojourners). Table 2 shows three relevant academic stage models.

Insert table 2 here

To find out if international students' adjustment follows sequences over time, Zhang, Sillitoe and Webb (1999) investigated Asian undergraduate students studying in Australian universities and identified the shock-awareness-change-competence stage model. They argue that most students have to go through these four stages during the transition. Each stage includes different academic practices, from learning shock to being aware of the differences in academic culture, where students make active changes and eventually move to the competence stage. The results of this study show no support for the U-curve stage model (shock and stressful at the entry stage rather than starting at the later stage).

In a recent case study, Major (2005) confirms a three-stage adjustment model of entry-dissonance-adjustment by investigating the adjustment of Asian-born university students (undergraduate only) studying in the United States. Major suggests three dimensions of adjustment throughout each stage: intrapersonal; sociocultural and academic. During entry stage, student sojourners had high expectation, but acted as an 'outside observer', doing 'intellectual tourism' (Major, 2005: 87). After passing through the first stage, these students soon encounter 'culture shock' stage (dissonance) by experiencing sociocultural divergence; cognitive divergence and academic discourse divergence. Finally, cultural therapy and personal and academic adjustment enable these students to move into the comfort zone.

However, these two studies explicitly focused on undergraduate students. Postgraduate students are distinguishable in many aspects, for example, the different attitudes towards academic expectation and university services (Arambewela and Hall 2013) and a relatively short period of time for sociocultural and academic adjustments in comparison to undergraduate students. To extend the knowledge on postgraduate international students' transition, Wu and Hammond (2011) advocated another three-stage model of encounter-challenge-full integration. Using mixed methods in a

longitudinal case study, they interviewed eight Asian postgraduate students from five countries and discovered a clear process of adjustment for most students. Wu and Hammond divided the process of adjustment into: pre-arrival and pre-sessional (stage one); term 1 (stage two) and the later part of term 1 onwards (stage three). It is the first model that integrates the pre-arrival stage into the process of adjustment research. However, we challenge this stage mode on two counts. First, it is claimed that ‘in the second term, the intensity of challenges reduced (Wu and Hammond 2011:432)’. Indeed, many postgraduate students, in addition to assignments, examinations and intensive lectures, start to prepare their dissertations in the beginning of Semester Two in many British universities. It is assumed that academic-related challenges will be increased, especially for those students who failed to adjust them into the new ‘academic system’ at this time. Thus, further investigation is needed. Second, Wu and Hammond (2011) in their stage model made limited efforts to explicitly explain what coping strategies Asian students used for their pedagogical adaption. This is such an important area which needs to be further investigated to improve international students’ academic performance. We hope that our research can fill this gap.

The research method

This research was based on a sample of twenty Chinese students studying one-year taught postgraduate degrees in Business and Management programmes from two British Universities in the North of England. Twelve students were selected from a pre-1992 traditional university (University A) and eight students from a large post-1992 new university (University B). The sample selection was based on two criteria. First, all participants were to hail from mainland China. Chinese students from Hong Kong and Taiwan were excluded due to different ideological, political and economic factors (Wang and Byram 2011). Secondly, the interviewees, apart from pre-English language studies (normally six weeks), must have had no overseas learning experiences in Western universities prior to enrolling on their programmes. For example, students who had already studied undergraduate programmes at British universities before they moved to postgraduate programmes were excluded as postgraduate students who have previously studied at British universities would certainly have different learning experiences compared to first timers.

With University A, twelve Chinese postgraduate students joined the Business school in 2011-12. The class observations were carried out over a period of one year by one of the researchers at University A. The one-to-one interviews, however, were conducted at the very late stage before they submitted their dissertations. The eight participants from University B graduated from the post-1992 British university either in 2011 or 2012. One of the researchers at this university maintained connections with these students. As both groups of participants had either completed or almost completed their year-long adjustment journey, the timing and rich experiences enable the informants to narrate retrospectively what they had experienced upon arrival and after that stage, how their learning was affected, and how they have been dealing with their

adaptation during their programme. Students were spread across the range of Business programmes, including MSc in Operations Management, Logistics and Accounting (OMLA), MSc in Operations and Supply Chain Management (OSCM); MSc Business Management, MSc Marketing and MSc Global Finance and Investment.

A mix of qualitative data collection methods was employed for this study, including one-to-one semi-structured interviews, observations of teaching sessions and the researchers' field notes. The observation data and the tutors' file notes assisted with the development of the interview data. These results are not reported in this study. Participants were informed about the research purposes and procedure before the data collection. Using the life-history-style approach (Bryman and Bell 2011; Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill 2009), the participants were asked to reflect on their adjustment difficulties and recall how they adapted over the duration of their programme.

The interviews were recorded using Mandarin rather than English as participants were more comfortable in expressing their opinions using their native tongue (Wang et al. 2011). The transcripts were written in Mandarin Chinese, but the identified themes were coded in English. The data were analysed using thematic and template analysis (King 2004). After completing the thematic analysis, core quotes that are most representative of the core aspects of the themes (Bernard and Ryan, 2010) are presented in this research. These core quotes bring the connection between data and important research questions. The selected core quotes were translated by two Mandarin Chinese native speakers, one qualified with two PhD degrees from one Chinese and one British university. Another one gained the UG degree in Chinese University and a Doctoral qualification from a British university. When deciding whether to present our selected core quotes in one or two languages, it was agreed that only English would be used for a reader-friendly version as Chinese characteristics would be meaningless for certain numbers of readers whose native languages are not Mandarin Chinese. During the data analysis, the authors independently analysed the data collected from their own university by identifying emerging key themes. To obtain agreed themes and ensure the reliability, constant comparison method was used to search for similarities and differences across the data (Strauss and Corbin 1998). Ethical consideration was emphasised so participation was voluntary and all participants were informed of their rights to withdraw from the research at any time.

Findings

The major finding of this study suggests that the students sampled, particularly those students who were successful in achieving good academic results, followed a clear process of academic adjustment during their one-year academic learning journey. As a development and extension of previous stage models identified in Table 2 we have defined this as a *process-based stage model*. The model identifies four stages: improper/confidence-stress-engagement and change-confidence. Each stage and its key features, including time scale, actions, coping strategies are summarised in Table 3 and discussed below.

Insert table 3 here

Stage 1: Overconfidence before departure (pre-arrival)

Our findings show that the period of pre-arrival emerged clearly as the first stage reflected on by many participants. These students described their feelings by using the words ‘*excited and confidence*’ rather than ‘*scared, nervous, stress and uncertain*’ as UG students experienced in previous researchers’ findings. One student commented:

I was not nervous but confident... studied 4 years at university (in China) I was independent and confident.... I was excited before my departure (University A / Student K)

However, these students were actually over-confident and under-estimated the difficulties they faced after arrival. Reflecting on the journey, many participants agreed that the lack of preparations in the ‘pre-arrival’ stage affected their later academic adjustment. Significantly, the research revealed that without prior Western learning experience and prepared knowledge before departure these students encountered many difficulties in mastering Western learning skills in such a short period of time. One student reflected:

If I do this journey again, I will definitely learn more about the Western teaching and learning system in advance. It would be more helpful if I had more information or knowledge about it (the Western education system) before I came to the UK– it would make a difference! (University B/ Student Q)

One of the coping strategies at this stage, as suggested by the participants, was awareness of the need to make personal efforts in obtaining advanced knowledge of British academic conventions. Additionally, half of the participants mentioned the recruitment agents’ role in their pre-arrival stage in China. Many Chinese students applied to British universities through local agents. However, the research revealed that over-reliance on agents had deprived students of valuable opportunities to understand the British education system, institutions and variety in different subject areas.

Using agents saved lots of hassles, but you did not know much about the courses you were studying. Agents normally tell you which one is good, I did very little research about my course before I came. (University B/ Student R)

As indicated above, a good preparation and an essential element of pre-departure from an academic perspective, included sufficient knowledge of the differences between the Western and Eastern learning and teaching systems. Students believed that to close this gap they should make more effort and felt that the recruitment agents should provide indicative guidance.

Stage 2: Stress of academic conventions (An observer)

For the first few days after arrival in the UK, everyone was excited about seeing and experiencing new things, however, the fascination soon disappeared. The second 'stress'-stage quickly commenced with the start of their academic learning journey. For the majority of students, this was at the beginning of Semester One and lasted normally for 3-4 weeks. The following comments are typical of the feelings experienced at this stage:

Stressful....My confidence was destroyed after I attended a few lectures and seminars. I had no idea where to start. (University A/ Student C)

I felt like a frog, leaping in the dark (University A/ Student D)

Our findings reveal that the stresses were articulated through two major concerns: overwhelming volume and content of received information and limited knowledge of academic conventions. The participants felt that they were 'duck-stuffed' with huge amounts of information delivered through timetabled inductions. Simultaneously, they had to handle the demands of attending different academic sessions, selecting courses and meeting tutors. One interviewee noted: '*it's difficult to handle all the given information. We need time to digest it.*' As a result, they put aside the brochures and guidelines, and only remembered the simplest principles such as 50% as the minimum score for pass. Another student recalled:

My learning experience in the first month was miserable, I was like an observer, knowing what differences are, but could not make mind when, where and how to make the adjustment (University B/ Student M)

To overcome these difficulties, some students adapted efficient coping strategies. Student A from University A articulated how he coped with this situation:

It (the system) was so different, but I told myself 'calm down'. The more panicked you are, the more this has negative influences on your later studies.

Other students suggested that being aware of the academic conventions and accepting them are also the influencing factors in related to their success. In other words, it was important for students not to allow Chinese norms and values to limit their perceptions.

Another participant reflected:

3,500 words assignment, oh my God! But I adjusted my mood quickly. I told myself many students survived, why not me? (Student G / University A)

The illustrated quotes indicate that although many interviewed students experienced academic stresses in the first few weeks, right attitudes and fast coping strategies helped 'smart' students to transfer to the next stage smoothly. A numbers of students from both University A and University B who achieved good academic results advised: '*do not*

only be the observer, you have to engage with the new system quickly' (Student A/ University A).

Stage 3: Engagement and adaptation (A fighter)

After experiencing the different teaching and learning activities at Stage 2, students then get used to the new system and deliberately started to engage with every-day learning activities and adjust themselves accordingly. The stories that emerged from the interviews reveal that many of them felt '*settled down and relatively comfortable*'; the level of performance anxiety and stress also had been reduced. The students were determined to change and were willing to adjust them from a '*passive observer*' to an '*active fighter*'. Two students commented:

... If you want to complete your Master degree, you must act in their ways
(University A /Student J)

One year masters study was short, you must force yourself to change and fight for good results (University B /Student N)

From the total of twenty interviews undertaken, a key feature of relatively successful students (2:2 above) was their strong sense of willingness to make changes happen quickly and take responsibility for their learning. One participant identified:

Adjusting was not easy, but you must change quickly. Think about time pressure! (University A/ Student A)

Two other coping strategies the participants adopted were a '*new time management approach*' and '*using a compatriot network to seek support.*' One interviewee concurred:

You have to decide what to read/write, learning new time management skills became crucial for studying here. (University B/Student N)

Another participant was typical in articulating how they used compatriot support to survive at this stage:

If I had learning difficulties I went to seek help from other Chinese students, particularly who took the similar classes before (University B/ Student P)

Interestingly, many participants did not use the added value services provided by the university instead preferring to rely on the compatriot support system to facilitate their adjustment. According to the interviewees, the existing University support systems worked as a very dominant effective cushion for them as '*the prior students did exactly what I was doing.*' This safety net provided conational coaching and mentoring that helped them work out the priorities of what needed to be accomplished in order to adjust to university life efficiently. Our findings indicate that Stage 3 took a relatively long time, from middle of the semester one towards the midpoint of semester two to evolve. Up to that point students had experienced a range of pedagogical approaches

and teaching and learning activities: writing assignments, considering tutors' feedback for the exams and assignments and completing their dissertation proposals.

Stage4: Gaining Academic Competence (A competitor)

Moving to Stage 4 (later in Semester 2 and onwards), many participants reported that they were more academically confident after passing through Stage 3. Although the workload in this stage was extremely intensive, certain numbers of students felt that they '*could cope with it*'. On students' academic achievements, the results are mixed. Most students expressed they were '*relatively satisfied*' with their academic grades (pass or 2:2) and felt confident to apply developed knowledge and skills to their academic tasks.

I failed one assignment in Semester 1....but passed all assignments and exams in Semester 2 I was confident using references (University B/ Student O)

I scored 60+ in 5 modules. I was satisfied with my results Not just home students can achieve these good results, I also made it! (University A/ Student J)

Nevertheless, it was not the same story for everyone. Three students were put on academic probation because of failing some core modules. One participant illustrated her experience:

I worked extremely hard in Semester 2, but too late, (I) failed badly in Semester 1. If I did this again, I would force myself to adjust faster (University B/Student M)

Based on students' learning experiences, our research has identified a '*process-based stage model*' which students followed to facilitate adjustment and '*fitting*' into their new academic contexts. This model builds on and extends existing stage models by identifying stages that are *contextualised* to the student's personal experiences and perceptions. These are uniquely *mapped* to a time line, and within that identify *what* is happening and finally *how* students developed coping strategies to engage with their new educational environment.

Discussion

This research set out to explore the experience of cross-cultural academic adjustment and coping strategies of Chinese postgraduate students' studying in British universities. The key finding is the identification of the *process-based stage model* to inform and embed academic understanding of the transition and adjustment of Chinese postgraduate students into their study programmes. Our model includes four stages: *improper-confidence*; *stress*; *engagement* and finally *gaining academic competence*. The process-based stage model is derived from students' experience and addresses the call within the literature by identifying how they develop coping strategies. It is clearly

evident that individual behaviour is critical in helping pedagogic sojourners 'fitting' into the new academic system. This model incorporates a wide range of personal factors associated with their successful academic adjustment, such as prior knowledge of the new learning system obtained at the pre-departure stage; getting rid of stress rapidly and developing a positive attitude towards changes.

Our stage model contributes to the literature on transition in three main areas. First, previous stage models have primarily focused on students' after-arrival adjustment. We extended the stage model to incorporate students' pre-arrival experience and found that the pre-departure stage plays a crucial role and has a considerable effect on Chinese students' later academic adjustment in the host country. Pedagogy is context-dependent. Both cultural values and prior academic experiences in the home country must be taken into consideration in understanding international students' transition (Klineberg and Hull 1979).

Furthermore, given the importance of the traditions and core values of student-centred learning system in the British universities, we argue that, for international academic sojourners, a successful transition relies on the combination of external supports (e.g. institutional and peer-assisted supports) and individual efforts. On the one hand, it is essential that HE institutions provide timely academic support and optimum services for international academic sojourners to improve their academic performance. However, on the other hand, it is not reasonable to expect institutions and tutors at the British universities to mediate *all* the problems faced by international students. Considering that a student-centred system is the typical Western teaching and learning approach, it is crucial to make these students acknowledge that self-study and individual efforts contribute to their successful transition. Our stage model shows Chinese postgraduate students how to manage their learning threats at British universities. This stage-led learning process provides a clearly defined time frame and different learning strategies to help Chinese academic sojourners prepare and plan their year-long adjustment journey in the UK.

Secondly, as a novel finding, for the first time it was identified that the Chinese educational recruitment agents' play a relatively important role in influencing students' academic adjustment. It is evident that these recruitment agents are heavily involved in steering students' choice of universities and programmes. One-stop application services provided by recruitment agents simplified the process and brought convenience for applicants. However, it reduced the opportunities for students to acquire useful academic information in advance. This finding is associated with the prior studies that confirm the links between the institutional factors (e.g. social support) and pedagogic sojourners' adaptation (Adelman 1988), which has not been explored in the past studies.

Thirdly, our study defined a time frame for each stage in the context of Chinese postgraduate students' transition that is absent in most stage models. According to Brown and Holloway (2008), 'there is little indication in many adjustment models as to how long each stage of the sojourn lasts (p.35)'. Distinguishing our findings from other

prior stage models, we clearly defined the time frame for each stage: 1) pre-departure stage; 2) the first arrival stage (after 3-4 weeks arrival); 3) adjusting stage (between 4 weeks and the beginning of semester 2); 4) achieving competence stage (the middle of semester 2). Our study confirms that the length of stay (e.g. 3 years UG VS. one year PG) determines the adjustment strategies Chinese postgraduate students adapted during their transition. How fast do these students have to integrate into the new system? Using a case-study approach, McClure (2007) discovered that Chinese PhD students (3 years) needed 6 to 12 months to adjust themselves into a new academic environment. Nevertheless, we found that the Chinese postgraduate students, with academic challenges and intensive time pressure, must quickly make themselves become familiar with the new learning system and adjust their learning behaviours accordingly. This finding represents the different transitional experiences between long-stay and short-stay international academic sojourners (Quan et al. 2013).

Practical implications

The research set out to address a gap in the current literature relating to the transition issues of full time and short stay postgraduate Chinese students by investigating whether there is a stage-led process of academic adjustment, and, if so, how has the adjustment been facilitated at different stages? As a result of investigating these questions, our findings have important implications for the three key stakeholders of Chinese postgraduate students, British universities and educational recruitment agents in China.

Firstly, it is crucial for Chinese postgraduate students to understand the key features of a typical British international postgraduate culture. The short time period of a one year taught programme presents a steep learning curve for international students. British academic conventions create challenges. To cope with such academic pressures, as our research shows, the major task for Chinese postgraduate pedagogic sojourners is to adapt proper stress-coping strategies during their transition. Our *process-based stage* model provides a step-by-step approach at the micro-level to help students make their pedagogic transition. First, it is suggested that Chinese students who have an early familiarisation with the UK education system (e.g. the ways of learning and teaching) are likely to gain a good degree. This implies the importance of gathering more information and gaining more knowledge of the UK education system at pre-departure stage. Secondly, our model reveals that Chinese students suffer most during the first 3-4 weeks. Stress was at its most intense during this stage. Students must be fully aware of cultural differences surrounding teaching and learning, and manage their own expectations. Positive attitudes developed at this stage facilitate students adjusting themselves into the new system rapidly in the following stages. Finally, Chinese postgraduate students, as short-term international academic sojourners, should be more sensitive to the time frame at each stage during transition and take ownership over their own learning activities.

The second practical implication is that our model helps HE institutions identify potential problems and areas for interventions. Chinese postgraduate students experience many difficulties in one year taught masters programmes in the UK. To enhance their overall transition experience, British universities must be aware that ‘understanding the adjustment process is an important component of the support services offered to international students (Brown and Holloway 2008, p.45)’. Based on our findings, we suggest that HE institutions review the timing of support to such sojourners. For example, as Chinese postgraduate students were most stressed during the first 3-4 weeks after arrivals, tailored induction events can be offered to these students rather than using a standardised one-time oriented induction approach. Moreover, tutors can facilitate more conversations with students to make them more sensitive to the role of their individual efforts, and encourage them to take control over their own learning activities during the transition. It may also be useful for institutions to get both academic and administrative staff be prepared to respond to these students within the first weeks when their demands are highest.

A third implication relates to recruitment strategies. According to the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education report (2011), HEIs in the UK are using sophisticated methods to recruit international students, including direct recruitment via universities and indirect recruitment via local agents. While it is acknowledged that recruitment agents bring convenience and benefits for Chinese students, there are negative impacts as well. Over-reliance on agents is shown to limit opportunities for students to acquire advanced knowledge of academic conventions, as students normally choose universities and programmes recommended by agents rather than conducting in-depth research themselves. Thus, the recruitment agents in the home country can play extended roles in supporting pedagogic sojourners at the pre-departure stage, such as organising pre-departure workshops for these students to introduce the difference between the Chinese and British education system; inviting graduated returnees from UK to share their learning experience etc.. Ideally, these events can be organised together with some British universities that have close connections with local recruitment agents in China.

Conclusions

In this research, we have documented the adjustment experiences of a group of Chinese postgraduate students transferring into two British universities. Focusing on pedagogic adaptation, our descriptions and iteration between data and literature enabled us to gain new insights into how these students deal with the period of transition and the required adjustments. While many studies investigate social/cultural adaptation, we discovered that short-stay academic sojourners, such as Chinese postgraduate students, have different attitudes and adapt certain coping strategies during their transition. Our developed process-led stage model puts forward the assumption that a practical-based model can be followed by Chinese postgraduate students studying in British universities. Identifying this pattern allows us to provide practical guidance for Chinese students, especially for Masters-level students who have less time to adapt to the new academic environment comparing long-stay academic sojourners (e.g. 3 years studies of

UG and PhD students). In addition to helping HE institutions develop their intervention strategies, this research clearly provides a student perspective on time frame and possible coping strategies at each stage for improvement of their year-long adjustment experience. Our findings also illustrated that students' own efforts and using appropriate coping strategies contribute to their academic success. While admitting the importance of institutional supports, a key contribution of our study is the emphasis of students' attitudes and commitments to their adjustments at a deeper personal level.

A limitation of the work links to the scale of the study. Quite clearly there is scope to develop this further by studying Chinese students' social and academic adjustments in a larger population. We would encourage future research to explore Chinese postgraduate students' adjustment in different Western countries, such as the comparative studies between British universities and US universities (e.g. two years postgraduate programmes in America). Additionally, our study uncovers for the first time the importance of the Chinese local agents' role in supporting students' adjustment, especially at the pre-departure stage. Recognising the importance of the role of the agent in Chinese higher education markets, further research in this area would benefit educators and institutions to understand better how these agents affect students' overseas transition, especially at the pre-departure stage. Finally, the findings do not uncover the direct links between the social/culture adjustment and academic adjustment. How psychological and sociocultural adaptations affect different groups of international students' pedagogical adaptation is an opportunity for further investigation.

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